Millions in Currants---How Greeks Make Fortunes in Raising Materials for American Plum Pudding---Look at a Farm Village

LOADING GRAIN AT PATRAS.

BY FRANK G. CARPENTER.

Patras.

The Greeks of to-day are a nation of farmers and sailors. The cities are few, and there are only twelve towns which have more than 10,000 inhabitants. The most of the people live in farm villages, from which they go out daily to their work in the fields. The holdings are small. The farms on the plains are from ten to fifty acres in size, and there are very few in the country which have more than 200 acres. I have spent the last week in riding through the chief agricultural districts, and pen these notes at Patras, the chief port of the west. It took me a day to reach it from Athens, and there were vineyards and farms all the way. I first crossed the plains of Attica. They are now spotted with orchards and vineyards. The trees and vines are bare, but the buds are swelling, and they will soon be covered with emerald leaves. The soil is a rich, reddish brown, which shines like velvet under the rays of the sun. The mountains are blanketed with robes of silver gray plush, the dusty grass, upon which flocks of sheep and goats are feeding.

As I crossed these plains I stopped at Eleusis to attend the spring festivities of the Greeks preparatory to planting, and thence came on to Corinth, which in the days of Christ was as large as Boston is now. It has shrunken to less than 1,000, and is mainly made up of farmers. The town has not been bettered by the Corinth Canal, which there cuts its way through the isthmus. The traffic is small, and most of the ships still go around to the Piraeus by sea. There was a ship in the canal as I crossed it.

From Corinth on westward the railroad passes for miles through great vineyards. The vines have been cut back, and they are now nothing but stumps as thick as my leg and as high as my knee. They are budding,

The Greek women have curious costumes, which vary according to locality.

and will soon put out the new sprouts for the year.

Millions in Currants.

As I looked at the stumps a Greek official with whom I was traveling said:

"It is these vineyards that give us our living. They produce the chief crop of the country, bringing in from $5,000,000 to $10,000,000 a year."

"Indeed," said I, "I did not know that Greece was a great exporter of wine."

"It is not," replied the Greek, "but these vineyards are not grown for wine. The grapes they produce are known as currants, and they are shipped all over the world for making plum puddings, fruit cake, buns and mince pies. We send thousands of tons of them to Europe and from 15,000,000 to 20,000,000 pounds to the United States every year."

"But the bushes are not like our currant bushes?"

"They are not currants in that sense of the word. They are a seedless grape as big as a marrowfat pea and as sweet as sugar. They are dried and sold as raisins. They get their name currant from the fact that they were originally grown near Corinth. We have, all told, about 15,000 acres devoted to them, and we regulate the crop so as not to cheapen the prices. This matter comes up in Parliament and it is one of our political issues. We have a currant bank, organized to aid the Greek farmer, and other banks help them in handling the crop. At one time the currant bank brought up the poor currants on the market and sold them to local distillers for brandy. This was because it was feared they might injure the reputation of the Greek currant in the markets of the world."

"From where are the currants shipped?"

"The most of them are sent to Patras, and thence to the different countries by sea. The export is sometimes as much as 3,000,000 pounds per annum."

A Crop for America.

Since this conversation I have made some inquiries about the Zante currant, as it is called, and am wondering if it cannot be produced in America. We are now taking about 13,000 tons every year, and this is about one-twelfth of the whole crop. We have all sorts of climates, and some which correspond to that of Corinth. Parts of California and Arizona must be of that nature. I am told that the currants often produce a net of $40 per acre and that a currant vineyard will sell for $100 or $500 per acre. The vines begin to yield in their fourth year, and are in their prime at twelve years. They will

A GREEK FARMER.

keep on bearing for fifty years, and vines are shown here which are said to be 100 years old. The vines are planted and cared for as in most grape-growing countries. The currants are ripe in August and are easily dried and racked for shipment. I am told that the inferior part of the crop now goes to Marseilles, where it is used in making the cheaper French wines, being mixed with grapes for that purpose.

In addition to the Zante currant Greece produces fine muscatels and sultanas, and also grapes which make excellent wine. The native wines are

THE CORINTH CANAL.

so cheap that the common man has wine at his meals. Many of the farmers make their own wines after the old style, in which the juice is trodden out by the bare feet of the girls of the family.

Grain Farming.

I saw but little wheat on my way across Greece, although I am told both wheat and barley are grown. The most of the wheat used is imported from Russia. Some is still raised on the plain of Thessaly, which in the past was the bread basket of the country. This plain is now divided up into estates owned by a very few people, who rent the lands for two-thirds of the crop. The government proposes to buy the larger farms and sell them off to the peasants on long time at low prices.

Another increase in the farming lands of Greece will come from the draining of Lake Kopais. This will add about 70,000 acres, and I am told that there is more which may be brought into use. As it is now, less than one-fifth of the country is cultivated and only about one-tenth is used for grazing. The only farms of any size are those in Thessaly and in the Kopais basin.

Poor Agriculturists.

The Greeks are very backward as to their farming methods. They are using the same tools their ancestors did when old Athens was in the height of its glory. The wheat is cut with the sickle and bound with the hand. The threshing is done with flails, or the grain is trodden out by bullocks. Much of the work is done by women and girls. Oxen are used for plowing, and the plow is a forked stick with a rude share at the end. Fertilizers are almost unknown and no rotation of crops is practiced. The people plant the same grain year after year, until the fields are worn out, and then let them lie fallow until they recuperate. The soil is thin and light, but if irrigated it produces bountifully. One of the great troubles is lack of water.

How the Farmers Live.

In the summer many of the farmers sleep out of doors and live largely in the open air. The country houses are almost every poor and rather mean in comparison with those of other European countries. They have stone floors and the poorer ones have neither windows nor chimneys. Some of two stories have a stable on the ground floor, and the people live above, going up by a stairway from the outside. There is almost no furniture, and a little stone stove or an open fire often forms the cooking arrangements. In the smaller houses the pigs are sometimes taken inside. A little low wall is built across one side of the room and there the people sleep at night.

The Greeks live simply. I did not see a drunken man during my stay in the country, and there cannot be much gluttony in a place where bread, wine and onions make up the average dinner. But little meat is eaten by the farmers, goat's cheese and dried olives taking its place. Olive oil is used for butter, and is eaten upon everything. Farm hands are usually fed upon bread and olives, with mutton or goat's flesh upon feast days. One of the great feasts is at Easter. This holds the same place as Thanksgiving with us, a roast lamb taking place of our Thanksgiving turkey.

The Honey of Hymettus.

You have all heard of the honey of Hymettus, which was so celebrated by the old Greek poets. That honey is sold throughout Greece, although it is claimed that honey from other places than Hymettus is equally good. All Greek honey has a fine flavor, which is supposed to be due to the thyme, which grows everywhere. An American woman who has made a fortune in bee-keeping in the United States and who understands all about flowers as honey producers has just made a tour of Greece. She says there is no land on earth so well fitted for the bee farmer nor any which has as many honey-producing flowers. She found fifty different varieties of blossoms on a tramp of one day and discovered that each contained honey. She thinks Greece might supply much of the honey of Europe if its bees were handled after modern methods. As it is now, the hives are mere baskets, plastered with mud, and the bees are smoked out when the honey is taken. Many are killed and the cutting is so rudely done that the honey must be pressed from the crushed comb and strained for the market.

A Queer Costume.

I wish I could lift half a dozen of these Greek farmers up by the napes of their necks and drop them down on the main street of an American city. You would not know whether they were men or women until you saw the beards on their faces. They seem to be dressed for the stage, and to be posing as ballet dancers. They wear knee breeches and leggins, and above them a dozen or less short white skirts, which are so stiffly starched that they stand out from the waist like those of the maid in the flesh-colored tights who dance about on the bareback horse of the circus. Above the skirts is a vest, covered with embroidery, and a fez cap tops the outfit. At the other end of the man is his shoes. These are of red leather, turned up at the toes, like old-fashioned skates, with a fat red woolen tassel on the tip of each shoe. Such dresses are always worn upon Sundays and feast days, when the men strut about and talk of the greatness of Greece present and past.

Greek Country Girls.

The Greek women have curious costumes which vary largely according to locality. As a rule their dresses are flowing, and they look well on the tall, long-legged maidens. A common field gown is made of linen; it falls from the neck to the feet without the fullness of the American Mother Hubbard. Over this is worn a sleeveless sacque of white wool, bordered with black stripes. Many of the girls wear knit or felt caps of bright red, and some have gay-colored handkerchiefs bound around their heads. The women are uniformly straight and well formed. They carry heavy burdens, and that on their heads. I am told they are intelligent, industrious and thrifty. They are taught to sew when quite small, and are expected to embroider the skirts to be used upon their wedding days. This is often done long before the marriage has been arranged for or even proposed. Such skirts are homespun linen, heavily embroidered with silk. I bought one in Athens, which had a band of silk thread, worked in curious patterns running a foot deep along the edge of the skirt. The silk alone weighs several pounds.

A Dance at Eleusis.

The Greek country girls have their national dances. I saw one at Eleusis, within sight of the ruins where were celebrated the mysteries, in the famous temple where Demeter was worshiped and where the art of agriculture had its start. You may remember the story Pluto, the god of Hades, had carried off the beautiful Persephone, the daughter of the goddess Demeter, and Demeter was hunting her. She came to Eleusis disguised as an old woman, and the King there entertained her so well that she gave seed corn to his son and taught him to farm. She finally found Persephone and arranged with Pluto that the latter might stay with her outside Hades for two-thirds of the year, while during the other third she would remain in darkness, like seed corn in the ground. It was on account of this legend that the Greeks held their farming festivities here, and here they have them to-day.

At this dance the girls were dressed in costumes of silk embroidered with gold. Their heads were covered with veils of fine silk, the ends of which were striped with gold. They wore the long gowns which I have described, and on their breasts were squares of gold coins so strung that they extended from one side of the body to the other. These breastplates were their fortunes, each girl carrying on her person the dowry which she brings to her husband in marriage. The Greeks have no marriages without dowries, and the bride is expected to add her share to the fund which the groom has laid up for starting housekeeping. In some parts of the country I am told that the boys of the family have to wait until the girls are provided with husbands.

Weddings in Greece.

Weddings are usually held in churches and the priests perform the ceremony. According to the rules of the church, a boy cannot be married until he is fourteen, and the girl bride must be at least twelve. In many places the girls are not married until fifteen, and in some not until eighteen. The dowry is fixed before the wedding, and if it has not been paid the bridegroom may demand the cash before the ceremony takes place. Many of the marriages are a matter of business and divorces are not uncommon.

The farmer's daughter is supposed to have a trousseau consisting of at least three costumes. One is for every-day wear, one for Sundays and the other for festivals. In going to the church the wedding party is usually mounted on mules, with a man going in front playing the bagpipes. After him come the bridegroom and his friends, and behind him the bride, who must be silent all the way. Following the bride are the mules bearing her dowry. The bridal gowns differ, according to the locality, and also the wedding customs. In one province the bride wears a gauze veil of old rose and in some other places the veils are white.

As the married couple leave the church their friends throw candies at them and accompany them to the house of the groom. Here the groom enters and shuts the door, after which the bride is led up. She first smears the closed door with honey and then throws a ripe pomegranate at it. The pomegranate is filled with seeds, and if it breaks and the seeds stick to the honey it is thought to be lucky and her married life will be happy. As she does this her husband opens the door and offers her bread and salt. She dips some bread into the salt and eats it, and then touches some water and oil. After this her husband lifts her inside the house and puts her in a corner, with her face against the wall. Here she is supposed to stay while he and his friends are eating the wedding dinner and as long thereafter as there is a guest in the house. When the last stranger leaves and her new lord gives her permission she may turn around and make herself at home. This is the one time of her life when every Xanthippe is silent.

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Boydton Social News

[Special to The Times-Dispatch.]

Boydton, Va., April 15.—Miss Lucy Homes, daughter of Judge W. E. Homes who has been visiting her sister, Mrs. W. L. Clack, of Richmond, has returned to her home here.

Blair Haskins and Edward Turpin, who are students of the Randolph-Macon Academy, at Bedford City, are at home for the Easter holidays.

The young women of the Current Events Club were delightfully entertained on Thursday afternoon by Mrs. St. John Chambers Goode, at her home on Jefferson Street.

Miss Bettie Smithson, of this place, has returned from Pulaski, where she has been teaching school during the past session.

Mrs. Ben Lloyd, of Virgilina, is here on a visit to her mother, Mrs. Sallie Bryson.

Mrs. John Williamson, who has been quite sick, is rapidly convalescing. Her daughter, Miss Anna Williamson, has resigned her position as teacher in Greensboro, N. C., and came home to be with her mother.

Miss Marion Homes, who is a student at the Woman's College, Lynchburg, is at home for the holidays.